

Rosh Hashanah 2 5787 - Joint conversation (Draft outline)

Rabbi Schwab and Rabbi Freedman

Should we be more excited or nervous about Jewish life in the time of AI?

RMS: Artificial Intelligence, AI, has actually been around since the 50's. However, as you likely know, the broad use of its current form, called *Generative AI*, has *exploded* in the last two years. Google now has a free version that automatically accompanies any Google search. ChatGPT, Claude, and Microsoft Copilot have reported a huge surge in their subscriptions and use. As they say, the train has left the station, and it is unlikely to return. Like the internet decades ago, some version and use of Generative AI is certainly here to stay. Today Rabbi Freedman and I would like to discuss AI from a *Jewish* perspective: Should we be more *excited* about AI, or more *nervous*? And how should we understand both perspectives?

RAF: That's such a Jewish question to ask: *but is it good for the Jews?* I have my serious concerns about where AI will lead us, but on balance, I am mostly excited. I'll get to the practical side later because I'll start with the big picture: AI is a startling feat of human *creativity*. People have created something that can assist humankind in infinite ways, small and large. We are talking about climate change, food insecurity, and widespread healthcare access, to go with personalized learning anywhere in the world. And more. AI represents a tremendous achievement in human creativity, which is actually a fundamental Jewish value. The Jewish tradition views creativity as a gift from God, one that we should express to its fullest potential, albeit in a way that keeps everybody safe.

We only have to read the first chapter in Genesis to see that God creates all living things, but that only people are created *Btzelem Elokim*, in God's image. That's nice, but what does that actually mean? One take is that it means God the *Creator* endowed only people with the ability to *create*: relationships, society, and culture. In other words, to be creative is to be Godlike.

There's a second Jewish text that also celebrates human creativity. The Midrash reads: *There was once a king who had two servants. He loved them completely. He gave each of them a measure of wheat and a bundle of flax. The wise servant – what did he do? He took the flax and wove it into a tablecloth. He took the wheat and made it into the finest flour. He sifted it, ground it, kneaded it, and baked it [into bread]. Then he arranged it on the table and spread the tablecloth over it. The foolish servant did nothing at all.*

In time, the king came home and said, "My children, bring me what I gave to you." One brought out the bread on the table covered with the tablecloth. The other brought out

the pile of wheat with the bundle of flax on top. Oh how embarrassing for him! [For the king far preferred the bread and tablecloth].

When the Holy Blessed One gave the Torah to Israel, God gave it to them as wheat from which to produce fine bread, and as flax from which to produce cloth.

The Midrash's focus is Torah, but I want to extend it beyond. Our tradition teaches us here that God gives us certain things - like raw abilities and intelligence- and urges us to utilize them specifically to create new things.

RMS: I agree that the foundational text about human beings being made in Gd's image is the central text to discuss here. But I have a very different perspective. While there is no doubt that the formation of Generative AI is an incredible creative achievement, the irony is that its creation is now *diminishing* human creativity. Our capacity to imagine, reason, create, and exercise moral judgment is what makes us *special* as human beings, created in the Divine image. But it is well documented that people are using AI to think *for* them and relying on *AI* to do the creating. To illustrate, Generative AI, used in this manner, has led to a crisis of sorts in high schools and colleges, where AI is writing many students' papers *for* them, not just assisting. They just type in the assignment and share their curriculum and poof! And that is just on the student level. If people cease pouring their *own* intellect, their *own* experience, and their *own* moral character into essays, sermons, poems, music, and art, we risk abdicating something essential about our Divine image. We may be violating *precisely* what is spiritually special about us as human beings. The problem is not using AI as an *aid*. The problem arises when assistance becomes substitution—when efficiency and convenience displace original thought, creativity, struggle, and personal expression. AI should *extend* human creativity, and so far the overall effect is producing the *opposite*. That is what I worry about and hope we can find a way to break this trend.

I also have a different concern about Generative AI: it can easily, and unfortunately effectively, produce and distribute wholesale *falsehood* in a convincing way. The Torah tells us in Exodus: מְדַבֵּר שֶׁקֶר תִּרְחֹק - "Distance yourself from falsehood." (Exodus 23:7). And the *Talmud in Shevuot* teaches that the word "distance" means we should interpret this verse broadly - not just "don't lie", but that it is our obligation to create distance from anything that could *lead* to a lie or false impression. We have to remember that Generative AI is a tool: it is not in itself moral, nor does it have moral judgment. And thus we need to *evaluate* it as a tool: does it do enough good to outweigh the harm it might create? It is here that, without serious regulation, I have my doubts. AI allows falsehood to be created more quickly, persuasively, and widely than ever before. And we, as a Jewish community, have been the victims of much of these fabrications.

Antisemitic tropes, false images, and misinformation that is damning to Israel are being created and disseminated by AI every day to millions, causing great suffering to our people. AI can and does *fabricate* information, create false citations, manufacture deepfake photographs and videos, produce synthetic voices and impersonations and often creates content with no attributions. I don't know about you but I have, in good faith, used AI to do research. Sometimes I read a sentence it produced stating something as plain fact with no source that didn't seem right. And when I challenged the AI to produce a source it told me that it was sorry, that this sentence was incorrect and had no source. And that misinformation was produced when I used it with *good* intentions for research purposes. It is clear that AI has already been used widely to create content *designed* to inflame rage, prejudice, and violence. And this makes me very nervous.

RAF: I'm afraid you're completely right here, that AI will amplify deception and anti-Semitism. I can't refute that. But I will point out that every leap forward in technological communication has been accompanied by this scourge of anti-Semitism. Do you what else has been bad for anti-Semitism? The internet. It's been a megaphone. Does that mean we should refrain from using it? Of course not. In many ways, the internet has been wonderful for spreading Jewish learning and making it accessible to motivated students. Centuries earlier, the printing press was the megaphone that broadcasted anti-Semitic ideas into the larger world. Should Jews have not participated in printing books? Of course not. Jewish publications made Jewish ideas and education accessible to all.

The same is true here. AI has a dark downside, as you mentioned. But it also represents an unbelievable opportunity. Now each of us in our community has a Jewish tutor. We don't need to know Hebrew, Aramaic, or how to navigate our way through thick books. You know, what we had to do at rabbinical school!

We can ask it: what does the Jewish tradition say happens to us after we die? What does the Conservative Movement believe about where the Torah comes from? Help me craft a Seder that meets the needs of little kids, school, age, kids, teenagers, and adults.

What Jewish books might be meaningful for me to read in my year of saying Kaddish?

For motivated Jews looking to learn more about our tradition, AI will take us to new heights.

RMS: Moving to a different topic: many researchers have documented that we are already living through an epidemic of loneliness. And now we are seeing that some are attempting to use AI as the antidote. But treating AI as a substitute for friends,

therapists, romantic partners, clergy, or community may actually end up just *deepening* that problem. AI, while it can often write and speak like a human, is clearly not. AI has no life experience. It is not an individual entity. AI does not morally, spiritually or intrinsically *value* anything nor does it actually *care* about anyone. There is no pathos and no true way for it to relate.

Further, AI cannot make soup when someone is ill, cannot attend a Shiva, cannot sit beside a frightened patient, cannot laugh over shared memories, and cannot embrace someone experiencing loss. Also, less considered but just as importantly, AI does not *need* anything *from* us. We cannot offer it service, sacrifice, patience, forgiveness, generosity or love. A genuine relationship is not merely the experience of being heard. It involves *listening* and being listened to, *receiving* and giving, *needing* and being needed.

Rabbi Danny Nevins wrote a rabbinic legal response to the use of AI, and in it he makes a similar distinction regarding *chesed*, acts of loving kindness: a machine may *assist* someone in visiting the sick, comforting mourners, or supporting the poor, but a human being must initiate and complete the act. AI can help us perform *chesed* by making any logistics easier or giving us tips. But it cannot relieve us of the responsibility to be the person in the flesh who cares. And the part that AI cannot do is part of the actual magic of Jewish community, one like ours.

RAF: On this we see eye to eye. The synagogue has always been a place of gathering—that's what the Hebrew *Beit Knesset* means. But gathering in person will be even more vital in the future because of what you shared. Synagogues will be where we gather in the same rooms to celebrate happy occasions, to mourn on sad occasions, and to join together for holidays. It's important to have friends, and we can find friends in so many places, other spaces. But a community is something different. It's a place where we feel connected to others who are of different ages and might otherwise not be friends. But we gather here because we are part of the Jewish people. And we can feel that only in the presence of other people. Nowadays there aren't many other places where we can do that.

I believe you might agree with me that AI is not intrinsically good or bad. It depends completely on how we use it. We are not asking people to not use it, but to be aware of its risks and use it responsibly. AI is like a fire. We need fire to heat our bodies and cook our food. But fire can also burn and destroy. Perhaps the real question is *How* can we use AI responsibly and ethically. That would be another fun conversation, but for another year.